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## "Dragging the Net of Estrangement": Poetics of the Sea in Elegies of the Mediterranean

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“Dragging the Net of Estrangement”

Poetics of the Sea in *Elegies of the Mediterranean Sea*

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

Shiraz Fazli

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2019



For Masuda:

لمسعودة:

when you left your garden  
for nearly thirty years  
you recalled Hafez's poems  
and even if you no longer  
pass the shady tree where from ashes and dust  
raindrops of lead formed mud  
you were still protected  
- by old rugs, cassettes, and iron locks -  
from wells the sun sucked their water  
until they dried

عندما تركت حديقتك  
منذ تقريباً ثلاثين عاماً  
ذكرت اشعار حافظ  
وحتى إذا لم يعد تمرّي  
بالشجرة المظلة حيث من رمادٍ وغبارٍ  
خلقت الأمطار الرصاصية الطين  
كنت لا تزال محمية  
بسجاد قديمة وكاسيت وأقفال حديدية  
من آبار مصّ الشمس ماءها  
حتى جفت

but you could not protect  
scattered photographs brown and grey  
stolen moments on asphalt  
shattered gravel covered in shells  
of another kind, another city.

أما لم تستطعي أن تحمي  
تشتت صور رمادية وسمرات الألوان  
لحظات مسروقة في الاسفلت  
قضيض مكسر تغطيه قذائف  
من نوع آخر ومدينة أخرى.

you didn't know until now  
that Kabul river flows  
for your brother,  
father,  
and mother.

لم تكوني تدري حتى الآن  
أن نهر كابل يجري  
لأخيك  
وأبيك  
وأُمك.

April 3, 2019

٢٠١٩ أبريل ٣

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### **Note on Translation and Transliteration**

The poems in this project appear as published in Ahmed Morsi's *al-A'māl aš-ši'rīya al-Kāmila* (*The Complete Poetic Works*, 2012). The translations were written in consultation with *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (4th edition), and the transliterations are written in accordance with the transliteration system from the same dictionary.

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## Introduction

The following analysis will expound upon the first fourteen poems of *Elegies of the Mediterranean Sea* to show how Ahmed Morsi juxtaposes the two destroyed landscapes of the sea and the city in order to reflect on his years of estrangement from both Alexandria and writing poetry. The sea and city are not separate entities, as the poems treat the sea as part of Alexandria's urban landscape. The essay will begin with Constantin Cavafy in order to situate Morsi in a tradition of Alexandrian poets and show how his conception of Alexandria differs from that of his former. By weaving in theories from Roland Barthes and Edward Said with Morsi's biography and poetry, the analysis will show how the poems deal reflect upon the struggles of estrangement and metaphorical exile. The poet does not just write about these states in terms of location; he writes about them in terms of himself as well, using language that show how he experiences events as if he were outside of his own body. The depth of meaning within certain Arabic words allow the poems to be read in literal and metaphoric ways that comment upon how poetry and language exists within the physical environment, and influences the meaning of the death of the city, sea, and poetry in these poems.

### *Alexandria in Poetry*

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.  
 This city will always pursue you.  
 You'll walk the same streets, grow old  
 in the same neighborhoods, turn gray in these same houses.  
 You'll always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:  
 there's no ship for you, there's no road.  
 Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,  
 you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.<sup>1</sup>

-Constantin Cavafy, "The City" (1910)

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<sup>1</sup> Constantin Cavafy, "The City," in *C.P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. George Savidis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 27.

In "The City," Cavafy writes about the relentless search for an escape from Alexandria, a city that haunts its inhabitants. The poet uses the second person to address his staying and passing time in the same place to acknowledge the city's power and its haunting memory. The city is immune to the effects of time while the protagonist ages in it, evidencing the passage of time.<sup>2</sup> The poem reads into the future, declaring that he will remain in the city, and warns against hope for escaping to another place. Without a ship to sail or road to take, there is no way to get away from the city. Wherever the narrator goes, he is unable to establish himself there because Alexandria pursues him. The poem's final line is about destruction: a possible life elsewhere ruined by the memory of his city, which contaminates the experience of living elsewhere, and makes those places uninhabitable.

Cavafy's Alexandria is inescapable because its memories are tinged with an eerie nostalgia. Edmund Keeley, who analyzes the poem by comparing it to its draft, "The Same City" (1894), focuses on the extended metaphor of the city, writing that "the image [Cavafy] wishes to project is. . .of the soul's landscape in those confined inescapably or by their own failure."<sup>3</sup> Cavafy writes about how the inner subjective world is like a city that is hopeless in all of its constancy. In his poems, the city is not just a place, but a metaphor for the restricted soul and its complexities. Furthermore, John Rodenbeck's analysis of Cavafy's poetry highlights his representation of the ordinary and mundane Alexandria, which demonstrates how lives are always shaped by the dynamics of culture and biology, while their material evidence eventually

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Keeley, *Cavafy's Alexandria*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, *Cavafy's Alexandria*, 17.

disappear.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, memories of the city remain even if the objects of those memories are ephemeral.

Cavafy's words about the lingering memory of Alexandria echo throughout Ahmed Morsi's poems, and "The City" is a reflection of Morsi's own experience with Alexandria. Morsi drew his inspiration from Cavafy, translating his poems from Greek to Arabic and including them in *Cavafy Suite* (1990), alongside etchings inspired by those poems.<sup>5</sup> Just as Cavafy wrote poems about his relationship to Alexandria, Morsi did so with a surrealist and at times nightmarish twist. Alexandria connects the two literary figures, who have each written about their conception of and relationship to it in describing a hopeless attachment to the city and the inevitability of returning to it. However, while Cavafy focuses on the gloomy nature of the unchanging Alexandria, Morsi focuses on its dramatic change to the point of its disappearance.

Born in 1930, Morsi first left his native Alexandria for Baghdad in 1955 in an effort to break from what he considered to be an embarrassing attachment to the city.<sup>6</sup> He returned to Egypt, moving to Cairo (1957), then spending a brief period of time in Kabul (1963-64), and then moving to New York City in 1974 where he continues to reside.<sup>7</sup> Morsi was drawn to poetry from a young age, remarking in an interview with Hala Halim: "[t]he teacher would see me on the tram in the morning, but would find me missing from the first lesson - so he dubbed me 'the poet.'"<sup>8</sup> Despite years of relocation, Morsi continues to identify himself by that moniker while he

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<sup>4</sup> John Rodenbeck, "Alexandria in Cavafy, Durrell, and Tsirkas," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 21 (2001): 150.

<sup>5</sup> Gypsum Gallery, *Ahmed Morsi: You Closed Your Eyes in Order to See the Unseen*, 2017.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51e80de8e4b00154ff184edc/t/5a27f064ec212d9052792522/1512566886696/Ahmed+Morsi+press+release.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Distant Shores," *ARTFORUM*, March 2018, 193.

<sup>7</sup> "Artist Biography," Ahmed Morsi, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.ahmedmorsi.com/artist-biography>.

<sup>8</sup> Hala Halim, "Intermediality and Cultural Journalism," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 37 (2017): 299.

returns to Alexandria in the lines of his poetry, images of his paintings, and other visual arts.<sup>9</sup> His art and writing have a symbiotic relationship that works towards representing Alexandria, and Morsi is often described as a poetic painter and painterly poet because of how the symbols used in one medium cross over to the other.<sup>10</sup>

Morsi's return to Alexandria is not just metaphorical. He travels back to Alexandria as well, saying "[e]very year I visit Alexandria—and find that it no longer exists."<sup>11</sup> Morsi reveals that his Alexandria disappeared after it changed to the point of being incomprehensible to him. This idea reverberates in his poem "Fourteenth Impression," where the speaker admits to Alexandria's disappearance: "Yes it has changed/ the Alexandria that you knew changed/ and perhaps it disappeared forever" (*balā laqad taḡayyarat/ iskandariyyatu allatī 'araftahā taḡayyarat/ wa rubbamā aḡtafat*).<sup>12</sup> These lines demonstrate Alexandria's transformation to the point where it is lost, and the dissonance between the poet's memory and the reality of the state of the city. Morsi's visits to Alexandria and his poetic interpretations of them reveal a break in what was once his inseparable bond to the city.

In *Marāthi al-Baḥr al-Abyaḍ* (*Elegies of the Mediterranean Sea*; 2000), the poet returns to Alexandria, which is a hopelessly destroyed toxic wasteland. This collection of elegies is Morsi's return to poetry after a thirty-year hiatus to which Morsi attributes his feelings of alienation following Egypt's defeat in the June 1967 War.<sup>13</sup> It follows the tradition of Arabic

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<sup>9</sup> Edwar Al Kharrat, "The Cavafis Suite of Ahmed Morsi," 4.

<sup>10</sup> "Ahmed Morsi: A Dialogic Imagination," Sharjah Art Foundation, accessed April 8, 2019, <http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/exhibitions/ahmed-morsi-a-dialogic-imagination>.

<sup>11</sup> Halim, "Intermediality," 309.

<sup>12</sup> ll. 8-10

<sup>13</sup> Halim, "Intermediality," 308.

elegiac poetry, mourning death while celebrating the dead.<sup>14</sup> Morsi elegizes the sea and Alexandria by bringing together his fragmented memories with images of waste, dying fish, undead sailors, and a poet-protagonist who witnesses it all. The poet plays with grammatical tense and person in order to imagine himself as the protagonist in the destroyed city, and to recall the Alexandria of his youth. As a result, he mourns his identity as a poet which came about from his thirty year absence from poetry.

### ***Baḥr, a Place and Poetic Device***

The title of the collection, “*Elegies of the Mediterranean Sea*,” implies that the sea (*baḥr*), which unites the poems, is dead. Its discard and beings such as fish, nets, and ships appear in the poems, showing how it proliferates life (fish), allows for death (nets, which catch fish), and provides a conduit for transportation (ships). While the Mediterranean Sea separates Alexandria from other Mediterranean territories at its border, it also provides a means of reaching them because its waters flow between North Africa, the Levant, and Southern Europe before emptying out into the Atlantic Ocean. The sea is a passageway, integral to preventing Alexandria's complete isolation from the greater Mediterranean area by connecting it to these other regions. There are multiple meanings for *baḥr* in Arabic, such as “sea” and “poetic meter,” as well as “connection,” “flow,” “rhythm,” “certainty,” “magnitude,” “objective,” and “calculability,” all of which allude to the sea because they encompass its size and movement.<sup>15</sup> For example, the idea of the flowing sea is the basis for the meaning “poetic meter,” which references its constant, rhythmic waves, and is a metaphor for poetry.<sup>16</sup> The poems utilize the

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<sup>14</sup>Tahia Abdel Nasser, "Between Exile and Elegy, Palestine and Egypt: Mourid Barghouti's Poetry and Memoirs," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 45, no. 2/3 (2014): 248.

<sup>15</sup> *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed., s.v. "*baḥr*."

<sup>16</sup> Robyn Creswell, "Poetry and Intellectual History in Beirut," in *Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 128.

concept of *baḥr* to develop the relationship between the sea and the act of writing poetry. In doing so, they mourn the poetry of the past, which alludes to both Morsi's writing hiatus and departure from Alexandria. Thus, the poems can be read autobiographically as works in which Morsi reflects on memories of the past that are centered around the *baḥr* in order to capture the place, poetry, and time.

“First Impression” (*Inṭibāʿun awwal*) opens by introducing the sea and fish, and shows the multiple implications that stem from *baḥr*. Morsi writes, “[t]he sea’s fish departed/ to the eastern port’s piers/ endeavoring to see you” (*karajat asmāku al-baḥri/ ilā arṣifat il-mīnāʿi aš-šarqīyyati/ sā ʿyatan li-turāk*).<sup>17</sup> Fish constitute sealife, populating the waters of the sea so that it is a viable environment. However, the sea is empty because of the departed fish, so it is devoid of the life that depended upon its water for survival. Fish move together in predetermined patterns that depend on the movement of the individual members of the group and change based on space and time.<sup>18</sup> Since individual fish typically move as a collective in patterns, they symbolize poetry’s rhythmic and metered words. Without them, poetry’s constituent is missing because the meter remains while its words depart it. Thus, “the sea’s fish” are part of the language of the *baḥr*, which, when read as “poetic meter,” shows how the fish depart from the regular rhythm of the meter which disrupts the movement of poetry. Another example of the poetic language and environment of *baḥr* is found in “Fifth Impression” (*Inṭibāʿun kāmīsun*) in which the poet recalls his past:

You were unlike any child who regards the sea  
as a temptation to swim in al-Raml

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<sup>17</sup> ll. 1-3

<sup>18</sup> David J. T Sumpter, "Moving Together," in *Collective Animal Behavior*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 101-102.

You were unafraid of circling over  
or underwater in search of the secret.

*lam takun miṭla ayya ṭiflin yarā fī l-baḥr  
iḡūā 'an li-s-sibāḥa fī l-raml*

*kunta lā takšā an tuḥallaqa fauqa l-mā'i  
a-wa taḥt al-mā'i baḥtan 'ani as-sarr.<sup>19</sup>*

These lines demonstrate how *baḥr* and al-Raml are significant for being locations in which the past took place. Like *baḥr*, *al-raml* is both a location and a poetic device, signaling a seaside neighborhood in Alexandria and a term for a type of meter in Arabic poetry. The play on words between “*baḥr*” and “al-Raml” emphasize the parity between the setting of the poet’s past and poetry. Thus, the child is tempted by the meter and exploring the environment of poetry as well as by the sea. The poet reflects on how he used to delve into the water, “circling” fearlessly, in exploration of the poetic environment of his childhood. He was totally submerged in the sea and capable of navigating its waters, even in the specific ones of the Alexandria’s neighborhood al-Raml. In turn, this shows how he was fully immersed in and adept at poetry, maneuvering through established poetic forms such as the *al-raml* meter. The connection between literally swimming in the sea and its metaphor of being immersed in poetic meter reveals a shared rhythm that is inherent to poetry, the sea, and the city.

### ***The Drowned City and Memory***

In “First Impression,” the poet, whose narrative is predicated on the destruction of his city, describes his past life by asking “did it matter/ that those first remnants of your youth/ were forgotten amongst the rubble of your drowned city” (*hal kāna yahmmu idā indatarat/ ātāru*

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<sup>19</sup> ll. 11-14

*ṣibāka l-ūlā / fī inqāḍi madīnatika l-ḡarqā*).<sup>20</sup> The city's landscape merges with a vast expanse of water that evokes the sea in its form and magnitude. The phrase "drowned city" suggests that the water crossed (or extended) the boundary separating the sea and dry city, leading to the city's demise. Due to its vulnerability to the rising waters, the city's weakness is only accentuated once the boundaries between the two landscapes are blurred because of how the city "drowned." The intersection between the water and the city depicts a struggle between the fluid and the fixed. On one hand, "city" describes a fixed location, while "drowned," on the other, evokes both a sense of flowing and constriction. Drowning is suffocating through the inhalation of water.<sup>21</sup> By this definition, the idea of flow comes from the presence of water and its fluidity. Parallel to that, the idea of constriction comes from suffocation. The poem implies that the water constricted the city, causing it to crumble under that pressure. Consequently, the "drowned city" exists in a state of immobility because it is a stable and rigid place overwhelmed by an outside force that is free-flowing and changing. Its wider implications allude to clashing tensions between movement and stability, the outside and the local, as well as leaving and remaining.

Lines like "remnants of your youth" and "rubble of your drowned city" evoke notions of material left behind from the city and the past. They "were forgotten," but not completely destroyed, which demonstrates their resilience. Nevertheless, it also suggests that youth is irrecoverable amongst the city's ruin, and as such are reduced to their broken forms: memories. Just as rubble is the disintegrated material of the city, memories are the immaterial substance of the past. Simultaneously, the poem speaks to the impermanence and inconsequentiality of the

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<sup>20</sup> ll. 8-10

<sup>21</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "drown," accessed April 22, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57953?redirectedFrom=drown#eid>.



city and youth, which used to exist solidly in place. Thus, the poem is a testament to the process in which material signifiers of the memory of youth lose themselves within fragments of a city shattered by the contradictory states of occupation and departure.

### *The Sea as City as Poetry*

The memory of the sea overlaps with the material of the city in “Twelfth Impression” (*Inṭibā‘ t̄ānīa ‘ašara*), where Morsi imagines the drought of the sea, writing:

Did the sea dry up?  
A question kept returning to me  
time and again  
as I was dragging my defeated ship  
over asphalt stones.

*hal jaffa l-baḥru?  
su’ālun zalla ya ‘āwidunī  
bayna l-faynati wa l-uḵrā  
fīmā kuntu ajurru safīnitīya l-mahzūmata  
fauqa ḥaṣā l-asfalt.*<sup>22</sup>

The protagonist drags the ship because it cannot set sail without the sea, so he is stranded on the hard asphalt that remains in place of what was once a body of water. Asphalt, which is at the base of the dried sea, is the same material that is used for paving roads and as such is symbolic of the city. It is used to construct the architecture of the city, forming the ground to build streets and roadways, thereby creating the urban aesthetic.<sup>23</sup> It is a new environment in place of the sea which is a memory questioned by the poem. The poem shows how the sea shares qualities with the city, and how they are not exactly two separate, opposing landscapes as they

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<sup>22</sup> ll. 1-5

<sup>23</sup> Čilek, Václav et al, "A Revolution of Surface: Successful as Asphalt," in *To Breathe with Birds: A Book of Landscapes*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 27.

may seem. Their similarities in material construction suggests that they also have parallel meanings in the poems.

Morsi's poetry can be read through the lens of Edward Said, who writes in his *Reflections on Exile* about how exiles experience environments as overlapping with each other and describes its implications on memory, writing, "[f]or an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally."<sup>24</sup> He explains how exiles experience two independent events at once, which are the present and memories from the past. Despite being different, the events share a common location where the past took place and the present continues to conspire. Although exiles can recall the time and place of the memory, they cannot physically reach the remembered location and its associated event. Thus, they are able to be in two places at once through the two modes of existence that are conceptual and literal, and experience their own history as a comparison between what is happening and what has happened.

Morsi's poetry reflects Said's notion of a double encounter with time and the contradiction between two different environments when he questions the absence of the sea while he drags a ship along the asphalt stones. By questioning the sea, Morsi highlights the contrast between the memory of the sea and the hard asphalt, which exists in the present. Thus, Morsi writes about the destruction of the city and the sea with the same experience of time and place as an exile. The idea of Morsi's poetry as an imagined representation of Alexandria shows how in the absence of the sea, there is no potential for connection or escape from the barren

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<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186.

wasteland that Alexandria has become. This means there is no potential for poetry, either.

Without *baḥr* there is a lack of the flow, connection, and rhythm that are directly referenced by the word. Unlike the multitude of meanings that are ascribed to *baḥr*, *al-asfalt* (asphalt) only has a single meaning. With it, there is only an empty, hard material from which nothing can proliferate unlike the sea, which was once populated with fish in Morsi's poetry.

The sea, city, and poetry come together again in "Second Impression" (*Inṭibā 'un tānin*), which describes the aging houses: "Fungi reached over the walls of neighborhood houses/ and steel doors no longer protected/ against the attacks of sea flies" (*judrānu buyūt al-ḥayy 'alāhā al-fīṭru/ wa lam tu'udi al-abuābu al-fūlāḍīyya taḥmī/ min hajamāti ḍubāb al-baḥr*).<sup>25</sup> Again, the sea and city are in opposition while the sea's flies attack the houses that are vulnerable to the small insects despite their metal doors. Houses (*buyūt*; sing. *bayt*) represent the city because they are the collection of living spaces which populate it. *Bayt* means "verse," which is either a line or stanza of poetry. Like *baḥr*, it has a primary meaning signaling a location (house) and a secondary meaning signaling an element of poetry (verse). In Arabic, the plural of "verse" is *abyāt*, stemming from the singular *bayt*, but differing from the plural for "houses" (*buyūt*). However, the semantic and sonic parallels and shared roots of verses and house comparatively show how a verse is like a house, and a house like a verse of poetry. If "verses" is read for "*buyūt*" and "meter" for "*baḥr*," then the poem is written about poetry: "Fungi reached over the walls of the neighborhood's verses/ and steel doors no longer protected/ against the attacks of the meter's flies." In this translation, the poem in its entirety is like the neighborhood, and so the whole collection of poetry resembles a city because it contains neighborhoods of verses. These

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<sup>25</sup> ll. 11-3

poems then are decaying, covered with fungi and attracting flies from the dead meter. Thus, the city is poetry and poetry is the city, revealing the traces of language that are embedded in the architecture of the city.

The relationship between the city and writing can be further examined by reading it in conjunction with Roland Barthes, who writes about the language of the city, remarking “[t]he city is a discourse and in this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it.”<sup>26</sup> The city communicates with its inhabitants, not just metaphorically but literally by what it signifies. City-dwellers converse with the city by walking through it and responding to its planning and architecture, and with every interaction they receive signs from the city in return. Thus, Barthes’ city constantly changes just as Morsi’s Alexandria changes, which reflects on the city as a subject and object in Morsi’s poems. His discourse with the city, as played out in the poems, shows how the poet’s departure from Alexandria ruptures the comprehensibility of the urban space upon his return.

### ***Multiple Perspectives***

When Morsi writes about “your youth” and “your drowned city” in “First Impression,” he questions the importance of this meeting of boyhood and the city. While doing so, he addresses himself in the second person, suggesting that he is addressing someone else. The poet uses the second person possessive pronoun, “your,” to speak to himself and show how he dissociates from his body. This isolation epitomizes the poems’ sense of exile, the predicament of which Said locates as being “isolation and displacement.”<sup>27</sup> The effect of “your” can also be read as the

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<sup>26</sup>Roland Barthes, “Semiology and the Urban,” in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 168.

<sup>27</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 183.

speaker posing a question to the readers of the poem, reaching out to them in order to contemplate his own lost city, youth, and identity as a poet. The poet's youth is lost in the destruction of the city, so those remains of his past are intertwined with the drowned city. To him, the memory of the city and his own youth there are synonymous. His past is located in Alexandria, so for the city to drown means the same for Morsi's past. These simultaneous instances of loss show how his memory is contained in the city. His memories of youth rely upon the existence of the city, so whatever happens to the city influences how he perceives his past and present.

In the final line of "First Impression," the poet proclaims Andalusia to be his own, switching from the second person into the first person. The last line of the poem, "my Andalusia!" underlines the poet's death because he claims the "Andalusia of dead poets" to be his own, thereby considering himself to be one of those dead poets. This is a change from the initial second person of the poem where Morsi writes about "your youth" and "your city." This shows how he writes to himself in personal contemplations that have to do with his own insular world rather than the external world. In this moment, the poet fully identifies with himself in a way that is limited by using the second person. The first-person possession of Andalusia both separates the speaker from the dead poets in the singularity of "my," and makes him a part of them. Thus, even amongst dead poets, Morsi is estranged from them, because he is not truly a dead poet by writing poems. He cannot own the title of a living poet either because of his hiatus from writing poetry and the destruction of a city that is so tied to being itself.

In “Third Impression” (*Inṭibā ‘un t̄alitun*) the poet remarks “[y]ou sometimes ask what compels me/ to visit al-Anfushi” (*qad tas ‘alu ‘ammā yadfa ‘unī/ li-ziyārat ḥayya l-anfūshī*).<sup>28</sup> Morsi grew up in the neighborhood al-Anfushi, so in these lines he contemplates his return there.

<sup>29</sup> The poet’s use of the first and second person in this line indicates that he is speaking to another person outside of himself. By reading the line as the poet speaking to himself, the switch from the second to first person reveals a separation between the poet’s mind and body. The outside person is inquiring about emotions and reason - the inner subjectivity of the poet. The first person is used to refer to the poet’s visit to al-Anfushi, where he physically brings his body to his neighborhood. Grammatically, “me” is the object of the verb “compels,” indicating how the poet is an object both grammatically and as a material thing, rather than a subject who thinks, feels, and acts. In this case, the subject of the verse is “you,” who is also the actor. In this line, the change from the first to second person demonstrates the separation between Morsi’s physical self, which acts and presents itself on the exterior, and the contemplative self that is involved with the poet’s mind. The poet uses the second person to write “you sometimes asked,” showing how his mind inquired into why he physically brought himself to al-Anfushi, and refers to his visit in the first person to demonstrate his physical presence in the neighborhood.

The pervasive tension regarding the poet’s departure from and return to Alexandria causes him to perceive his body as outside of himself. He asks in “Eighth Impression” (*Inṭibā ‘un t̄aminun*):

why did the returning poet turn over  
tombs of the sea  
without heeding to the glory of death

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<sup>28</sup> ll. 1-2

<sup>29</sup>Halim, "Intermediality and Cultural Journalism," 299.

did he know  
 that upon leaving Alexandria  
 he would no longer encounter his body  
 on the gravel of her streets

*wa limāḍā yuqallabu aš-šā'iru al-'ā'idu  
 ajdāṭa l-baḥri  
 dūna iktirāṭin bi-jalāli al-mauti  
 wa hal kāna yadrī  
 annahu ḥīna ḡādara iskandarīyya  
 lam ya'ud yulqī jismahu  
 fauqa ḥašbā'i ḥawārīhā<sup>30</sup>*

Upon the poet's return, he ignores the greatness of death and rouses the dead of the sea. The interaction between the poet and the tombs shows how his return disturbs the dormant dead with the unpredictability of his arrival. The connection between *baḥr* and poetry again suggests that the poet is turning the tombs of poetry, hinting at his re-entry into writing after his practice has been declared long gone. Nonetheless, the poem reveals that the consequence of the poet's departure from Alexandria is that he cannot "encounter his body" there, which shows how he is outside of himself when he returns to the city. He is also disconnected from Alexandria, because despite his return he still cannot touch its gravel and wholly associate himself with the city, suggesting that a part of him is missing from it. Said writes that "[t]he pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question."

<sup>31</sup> The poet, estranged from the city and dissociated from himself, loses contact with Alexandria's ground even upon his return. Thus, his return is incomplete, and cannot be considered a homecoming in accordance with Said's logic because he has lost contact with the

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<sup>30</sup> ll. 1-7

<sup>31</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 179.

earth. This demonstrates the instability instigated by leaving his home, and impossibility of finding a life elsewhere or re-establishing his life in the city. He is uprooted from the earth, barely touching its surface and living outside of the space that others occupy.

### ***Empty Spaces and a Lonely Poet***

The poet refers to himself in the second and third person when he comments on the city's empty spaces and his solitude. He exemplifies the desolate locality in "Thirteenth Impression" (*Inṭibā 'un tālīṭa 'ašara*), writing "[t]he café vacated/ and the cursed poet hid fearfully/ as corpses of dead sailors surround him" (*aqfara l-maqhā/ wa anzawā aš-šā 'iru al-mal 'ūnu k̄aufan/ tuḥiṭuhu jutaṭu al-baḥḥārati al-mautā*).<sup>32</sup> The poet describes himself as surrounded by death in the empty café, which remains a shell of the meeting point that it used to be, and shows how the markers of society are vacant. Barthes writes about how "the city, essentially and semantically, is the place for meeting with the *other*, and it is for this reason that the centre is the gathering place in every city; the city centre is instituted above all by the young people."<sup>33</sup> The city's function and meaning is founded upon encounters with distinct individuals who come together in shared spaces. However, the poem depicts an empty space, epitomizing the lost sociality of the city whose sole survivor is the poet. Morsi conceives of Alexandria as a vacated city of the dead. The social component that is integral to cities has vanished as well. The café is the sort of gathering point that is an especially important site for developing a city's culture. When Morsi speaks about Alexandria, he recalls the streets lined with cafés, and how he wrote poems in them and met with others.<sup>34</sup> To him, they are social and creative spaces, so the

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<sup>32</sup> ll. 1-3

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, "Semiology and the Urban," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 171.

<sup>34</sup> Halim, "Intermediality and Cultural Journalism," 299.



vacant café demonstrates the loss of those meanings. Thus, the solitary poet is estranged from society, himself, the city, and its sea.

The poet is not only alone, but he is also alien to himself in these moments of solitude. Other instances of the poet's seclusion appear throughout the poems, such as in "Fourth Impression" (*Inṭibā 'un rābi 'un*), where "the beach vacated with the exception of you alone" (*aš-šātā 'u aqfara b-istiṭnā 'ika waḥdaka*),<sup>35</sup> and in "Ninth Impression" (*Inṭibā 'un tāsi 'un*) where the poet writes about visiting Anfushi, saying "and here you are now walking alone/ on the reversed path towards the end..." (*wa hā anta l- 'āna waḥdaka tamšī/ fī aṭ-ṭarīqi al-ma 'kūsi naḥwa l-nihāya*).<sup>36</sup> In the three poems, the poet refers to himself as "the poet," and "you," which exemplifies the poet's role as being alienated from himself, which recalls Barthes' conception of the city as the location for meeting the other. Since he is alone in the city, the poet can only meet with himself. His language, however, demonstrates that he is estranged from himself, leading to a confrontation that plays out between his poetic and corporeal selves.

By returning to the first stanza of "First Impression," where "[t]he sea's fish departed" (*ḵarajat asmāku al-baḥri*), the sea can be read as a kind of empty city. At this point, the poem can be interpreted in two ways: the fish leaving their home, and the words departing from poetic meter. While this line metaphorically alludes to a drought of poetry, it also mirrors the poet's own exit from Alexandria. In leaving Alexandria, he left the sea just as the fish left the sea. The exit from meter, explained earlier as the dual meaning of "sea" and "poetic meter" for *baḥr*, reflects his thirty-year hiatus from writing poetry. Thus, the line can be read metaphorically as autobiographical as it unites the literal and metaphorical interpretations in one phrase: Morsi's

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<sup>35</sup> ll. 8-9

<sup>36</sup> ll. 16-7

departure from his city and poetry-writing. As a whole, the poem ponders on the possibilities of Alexandria's existence without the life that inhabits it. The city is deserted because, like the poet, Alexandria is alienated and misses its cafés, beaches, and people, which is a loss for the poet as well. These places are only significant because of the lives that inhabit it. An Alexandria taken over by the dead has become a barren wasteland, and therefore the city itself is dead.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Morsi's poems, which illustrate the overlapping environments of sea and city, are memoirs of his alienation from Alexandria and the poetic form. The death of the city and the sea in these poems implies Alexandria's demise stemming from the end of poetry. The layered meanings and temporality behind the words of the poems are a way to show the poet's estranged relationship to poetry, Alexandria, and himself. They reflect the nature of the city, too, as a jumbled mix of the past and present. Morsi converses with the city and sea through his conversations with poetry. As symbolized by the "net of estrangement" that appears in "First Impression," these feelings of alienation and nostalgia are intricately connected in an invisible web that is brought together with the sea and city. Their basic building materials- asphalt, water, gravel- are given gravitas by their appearance in the poems, and reduces the complexity these environments into their most mundane forms. His Alexandria is not elevated or romantic, but one that is attached to personal memories and familiar spaces. He presents poetry's traces in the environment, and those of the environment in poetry, showing how the written word holds the world together.

الأنفوشي  
Anfushi

## First Impression

The sea's fish departed  
to the eastern port's piers  
endeavoring to see you.  
You were dragging the net of estrangement  
the feeling suffocates you as you witness your birthplace  
from holes in the ground  
as *Amshir* attacks it.

Did it matter  
that those first remnants of your youth  
were forgotten amongst the rubble of your drowned city

Atlantis  
the Andalusia of dead poets

my Andalusia!

February 27, 1998

## انطباع أول

خَرَجَتْ أسماكُ البحرِ  
إلى أرصفةِ الميناءِ الشرقيَّةِ  
ساعيةً لتركِ.  
كُنْتَ تُجرُّ شباكَ الغرْبِيةِ  
يعصِرُكَ الإحساسُ بأنَّكَ تشهدُ مسقطَ رأسِكَ  
من ثقبٍ في الأرضِ  
يهاجمُهُ أمشييرُ.

هل كانَ يهْمُ إذا اندثرتْ  
أثارُ صباكِ الأولىِ  
في أنقاضِ مدينتِكَ العرْقِيِ

أتلانتيسُ  
أندلسُ الشعراءِ الموتىِ

أندلسي!

٢٧ فبراير ١٩٩٨

## Second Impression

The sea is polluted  
the iodine air mingled  
with the scents of human waste

is this why the seagulls migrated  
to seek refuge with snakes of the desert  
snakes of paradise?  
Is this why the virescent sardines are no longer  
lured by the fishermen's songs  
the drum beats  
and the crashing river?

Fungi reached over the walls of neighborhood houses  
and steel doors no longer protected  
against the attacks of sea flies.

March 3, 1998

## انطباع ثانٍ

البحرُ تلوّثُ  
نافجةُ اليودِ امتزجتُ  
بشَمِيمِ نِفاياتِ الإنسانِ

أَلِهَذَا هاجَرَ طَيْرُ النَّوْرَسِ  
معتصماً بثعابينِ الصَّحْرَاءِ  
ثعابينِ الفِرْدَوْسِ؟  
أَلِهَذَا لَمْ يُعِدِ السَّرْدِينُ الأَخْضَرُ  
بِستُهويهِ غناءِ الصَّيَّادِينَ  
وَقَرعِ الطَّبَلِ  
وَقَدْفِ النَّهْرِ؟

جُدْرانُ بيوتِ الحيِّ علاها الفِطْرُ  
ولم تُعِدِ الأبوابُ الفُولاذِيَّةُ تَحْمِي  
مِنَ هَجَمَاتِ ذُبَابِ البَحْرِ.

٣ مارس ١٩٩٨

### Third Impression

You sometimes ask what compels me  
to visit al-Anfushi  
although my father is buried in al-Qabbari  
while my mother is shrouded  
in the Darwish family cemetery in al-Hadra  
as my living sisters  
and brothers  
live in some place or another in al-Raml  
but I was and still am  
for reasons I do not understand  
in search of something  
for which I do not know if it has a name  
or shape  
or eyes that know me.

### انطباع ثالث

قَدْ تَسَأَلُ عَمَّا يَدْفَعُنِي  
لِزِيَارَةِ حَيِّ الْأَنْفُوشِيِّ  
مَعَ أَنَّ أَبِي مَدْفُونٌ فِي الْقَبَّارِيِّ  
أَمَّا أُمِّي فَهِيَ مَسْجَاةٌ  
بِمَدْفَنِ أُسْرَةِ دَرُوشٍ فِي الْحَضْرَةِ  
وَشَقِيْقَاتِي  
وَأَشِقَائِي الْأَحْيَاءِ  
يَعِيشُونَ هُنَا وَهُنَاكَ بِحَيِّ الرَّمْلِ  
لَكِنِّي كُنْتُ وَمَا زِلْتُ  
لِأَسْبَابٍ لَا أَفْهَمُهَا  
أَبْحَثُ عَنْ شَيْءٍ  
لَا أَعْرِفُ إِنْ كَانَ لَهُ اسْمٌ  
أَوْ شَكْلٌ  
أَوْ عَيْنٌ تَعْرِفُنِي.

March 4, 1998

٤ مارس ١٩٩٨

#### Fourth Impression

The fishing ships rested  
 before the narrow strait  
 for a sudden sign of the traveling sun  
 fishermen of mullet and squid yawn  
 while clam diggers  
 await the 'Asr call to prayer  
 as raindrops flood the asphalt

the beach emptied with the exception of you alone  
 walking aimlessly  
 captured by the view  
 your black umbrella shakes in your right fist  
 as you tried to protect in the other

a bag packed with dead shellfish  
 and scraps from notebooks of poetry  
 and on your hunched shoulders you carry in sorrow  
 your dead and a Canon camera.

#### انطباع رابع

رَبَضَتْ سُنْفُنُ الصَّيْدِ  
 أَمَامَ الْبُوعَاظِ الْمَوْصُودِ  
 تُرَاقِبُ آيَةَ بَادِرَةِ لِسْفُورِ الشَّمْسِ  
 يَتَنَاءَبُ صَيَّادُو الْبَرَبُؤِيِّ وَالْحَبَّارِ  
 وَصَيَّادُو الْجَنْدُفِيِّ  
 يَنْتَظِرُونَ أَدَانَ صَلَاةِ الْعَصْرِ  
 وَشَابِيبُ الْأَمْطَارِ تَقْبِضُ عَلَى الْأَسْفَلِ  
 الشَّاطِئِ أَقْفَرَ بِاسْتِنَائِكَ وَحَدِّكَ  
 كُنْتَ تَسِيرُ بِأَى هَدْيٍ  
 مَاخُودًا بِالْمَشْهَدِ  
 تَرْتَجُّ مِطْلَتَكَ السُّودَاءُ بِقَبْضَتِكَ الْيُمْنَى  
 وَتَحَاوِلُ أَنْ تَحْمِيَ بِالْأُخْرَى  
 مِخْلَاةً إِكْتَطَّتْ بِقَوَاعِ مَيْتَةٍ  
 وَقُصَاصَاتٍ مِنْ كُرَّاسَاتِ الشَّعْرِ  
 وَعَلَى كَيْفِ حَدْبَاءِ تَحْمِلُ فِي ضَجْرِ  
 مَوْتَاكَ وَكَامِيرَا Canon .

March 6, 1998

٦ مارس ١٩٩٨

## Fifth Impression

You were - as I recall - seven years old  
 the house had a balcony  
 facing the sea  
 at a corner revealing a pile of nets  
 covering the ground and the stone wall  
 and a pile of fish  
 glimmering in the early daylight  
 under the splendor of the sun

you used to explore the open blue horizon  
 clearing smoke from ships  
 you were unlike any child who regards the sea  
 as a temptation to swim in al-Raml

you were unafraid of circling over  
 or underwater in search of the secret

you were unafraid of any secret.

March 13, 1998

## انطباع خامس

كنت - في ما أذكر - في عامك السابع  
 كان البيت له شرفة  
 ترونو إلى البحر  
 عند زاوية تكشف عن كومات شباك  
 تغطي الأرض والسور الحجري  
 وأكوام من الأسماك  
 تلالاً في ضوء الصبح الباكر  
 تحت سنى الشمس

كنت ترتاد الأفق الأزرق المفتوح  
 مستجلباً دخان البواخر  
 لم تكن مثل أي طفل يري في البحر  
 إغواءً للسباحة في الرمل

كنت لا تخشى أن تحلق فوق الماء  
 أو تحت الماء بحثاً عن السر

كنت لا تخشى أي سر.

١٣ مارس ١٩٩٨



## Sixth Impression

The studio remains  
as though I hadn't left it  
for more than sixty years  
embracing the view of the sea.

The darkness of the palace facing Ras El-Tin  
moorings of the cargo ships  
calls of the seagulls

your mirrors were sails wrapping  
on the mast of a boat  
reflecting the unseen that  
will come from afar

from the bottom of the sea in a shell  
in an oyster in the fishermen's nets  
between plants and disfigured corpses  
in any beach or harbor.

March 19, 1998

## انطباع سادس

غرفة الرسم لاتزال  
كأنني لم أبارحها  
منذ أكثر من ستين عاماً  
تُعانيق المشهد البحري.

غُموض القصر المتوج رأس التين  
مرسى بواخر الشحن  
صيحات النوارس.

كانت مرآيك تلتف قلاعاً  
على صواري المركب  
تعكس المخبوء الذي  
سوف يأتي من بعيد

من باطن البحر في قوقعة  
في محارة في شباك الصيد  
بين الأعشاب والجنت الشوهاة  
في أي شاطئ أي ميناء

١٩ مارس ١٩٩٨

## Seventh Impression

Surprise shamed you  
 how did you remember the window open to the harbor?  
 And children's drawings hanging  
 by pins above the walls

mermaids play  
 in the middle of the skeletons of drowned ships  
 and birds of prey  
 pounce rising from the seabed  
 and naked women click together seashells  
 under the burning of the sun

you remember things  
 and places that leave no visible trace  
 and creatures you did not find  
 on neither land nor sea

but you do not remember  
 any human traces  
 - with the exception of your mother and father -  
 the acid of forgetfulness did not erode them

## انطباع سابع

وَعَرَّتْكَ الدَّهْشَةُ  
 كَيْفَ تَذَكَّرْتَ الشُّبَّانِ الْمَفْتُوحِ عَلَى الْمِيْنَاءِ؟  
 وَرَسُومَ الْاَوْلَادِ مُعَلَّقَةً  
 بِدَبَابِيْسٍ فَوْقَ الْجُدْرَانِ

وَعِرَائِسَ بَحْرِ تَلْهُو  
 وَسَطَّ هَيْكَلِ اجْسَادِ الشُّفَنِ الْعَرَقِي  
 وَطِيوراً جَارِحَةً  
 تَتَوَاتَبُ طَالِعَةً مِنْ قَاعِ الْبَحْرِ.  
 وَصَبَايَا يَنْقُرْنَ الْاَصْدَافَ عَرَايَا  
 تَحْتَ لَهِيْبِ الشَّمْسِ

تَتَذَكَّرُ اَشْيَاءَ  
 وَاَمَاكِنَ لَيْسَ لَهَا اَثْرُ  
 تَجْلُوهُ الْعَيْنُ  
 وَمَخْلُوقَاتٍ لَمْ تُوجَدْ  
 فِي الْاَرْضِ وَلَا فِي الْبَحْرِ

لَكِنَّكَ لَا تَتَذَكَّرُ  
 اَيَّ مَلَامِحِ اِنْسَانٍ  
 - بِاسْتِثْنَاءِ اَبِيْكَ وَاُمِّكَ -  
 لَمْ تُفْسِدْهَا اَحْمَاضُ النِّسْيَانِ

March 23, 1998

٢٣ مارس ١٩٩٨

### Eighth Impression

and why did the returning poet turn over  
tombs of the sea  
without heeding to the glory of death  
did he know  
that upon leaving Alexandria  
he would no longer encounter his body  
on the gravel of her streets  
nor any shadow large or small  
like any foreign body  
the ground rejected him so he appeared without a shadow?

March 24, 1998

### انطباع ثامن

ولماذا يُقَلِّبُ الشاعِرُ العائِدُ  
أجداتِ البحرِ  
دونَ اكتراثٍ بجلالِ المَوْتِ  
وهلْ كانَ يدري  
أنَّهُ حينَ غادرَ اسكَنْدَريَّةَ  
لم يُعَدِّ يُلقي جِسمَهُ  
فوقَ حَصْباءِ حَواريها  
أيُّ ظلٍّ طويلٍ أو قصيرٍ  
كأيِّ جسمٍ غريبٍ  
أنكرتُهُ الأرضُ فأضحى بلا ظلٍّ؟

٢٤ مارس ١٩٩٨

## Ninth Impression

You returned to Anfushi  
again traversing  
the border of volatile time  
the unnamed desire urges you to throw light on a body  
which cast a shadow upon the ground

you did not believe your eyes  
as the visible mixed with the invisible and doubt prevailed.

You were until the moment of your grim return unknowing  
or trying to convince yourself  
that you walk  
with people on the same earth  
the same city

and unexpectedly  
this thing appeared  
but you were perturbed by fear  
and here you are now walking alone  
on the reversed path towards the end...

March 27, 1998

## انطباع تاسع

عُدتَ للأنفوشي  
وللمرة الثانية اجتزتَ  
حاجزَ الزمنِ الملعومِ  
تحدوكَ الرغبةُ الغفلةُ في استجلاءِ جسمٍ  
ألقيَ على الأرضِ ظلًا

لم تصدقْ عينيكَ  
والتبسَ المنظورُ باللا منظورِ وانتصَرَ الشكُّ

كنتَ حتى لحظةِ عودتكَ الجهمّةِ لا تدري  
أو تحاولُ أن تُقنعَ نفسك  
أنك تمشي

مع الناسِ على نفسِ الأرضِ  
نفسِ المدينةِ

وعلى حينِ غرةٍ  
لاخ هذا الشيءِ  
لكِنَّكَ اضطرَّبتَ مِنَ الخوفِ  
وها أنتَ الآنَ وحدكَ تمشي  
في الطريقِ المعكوسِ نحوَ النهايةِ...

٢٧ مارس ١٩٩٨

## Tenth Impression

When you reached the sea  
 accompanying your daughters during the  
 summer  
 at first the sense of sin and deception befell you  
 and no matter how much you tried to hide it  
 volcanoes of the soul made your mask bleed

since then ten years have passed  
 throughout them Polaroid photos destroyed  
 but their impressions remain  
 of what they saw and did not see  
 still appear in the faded pictures  
 like a shackled bird.

You did not intend  
 in reality to bestow upon them  
 a false inheritance  
 when you offered them a rusty key  
 so that they may break open Alexandria

you never thought  
 that what you held  
 never was its key on any day  
 rather it was an illusion of an illusion.

March 28, 1998

## انطباع عاشر

عندما جئت البحر  
 مصطحباً بنتيك إبان الصيف  
 في الوهلة الأولى اعتراك الإحساس بالإثم والزيف  
 ومهما حاولت إخفاءه  
 كانت براكين الروح تدمي قناعك

قد مضت حتى الآن عشرة أعوام  
 تلاشت خلالها صور البولارويد  
 لكن لا تزال انطباعاتهما  
 عما رآته وما لم تراه  
 تلوح في الصور الباهتة الألوان  
 كطيور مصفد.

لم تكن تعني  
 في الحقيقة أن تعطيهما  
 إرثاً زائفاً  
 عندما قدمت مفتاحاً صديناً لهما  
 كيما تقضا مدينة اسكندرية

كنت لا تدري أبداً  
 أن ما حملته  
 لم يكن بمفتاحها في أي يوم  
 بل كان وهماً لوهم.

٢٨ مارس ١٩٩٨

## Eleventh Impression

Did the sea dry up  
and the ships tied to the anchors no longer  
pushed by the desire to set sail into the unknown?

The storm was throttled  
I longed for the smell of the wind and even in Amshir  
I did not hear the heaving of the wind

did the sea dry up?  
I ride on the deck crowded with floating feet  
I stumble onto ships  
their dead sailors implore me

to empty their cargo  
or silently keep them  
from the sun's oppression.

April 2, 1998

## انطباع حادي عشر

هل جفَّ البحرُ  
ولم تعدِ السفنُ المربوطةُ في المخطافِ  
تُهدِّدها الرغبةُ في الإقلاعِ إلى المجهولِ؟

العاصفةُ اختنقتُ  
فقدتُ زخمَ الريحِ وحتَّى في أمشيرِ  
لم أسمعَ للريحِ زفيرُ

هل جفَّ البحرُ؟  
أسيرُ على السطحِ المسجورِ بأقدامِ طافيةٍ  
أتعثرُ في سفنِ  
يتوسَّلُ بي بحارتُها الموتى

أن أُفرِّغَ شحنتَها  
أو أبعدَ عنهم في صمتِ  
طغيانِ السَّمْسِ.

٢ أبريل ١٩٩٨

## Twelfth Impression

Did the sea dry up?  
A question kept returning to me  
time and again  
as I was dragging my defeated ship  
over asphalt stones.

People sleepwalk  
with pupils open wide  
and on their shoulders bags of water  
that hungry fish lick  
as they drop to the ground.

April 3, 1998

## انطباع ثاني عشر

هل جفَّ البحرُ؟  
سؤالٌ ظلَّ يعاودني  
بينَ الفينةِ والأخرى  
فيمَا كنتُ أُجرُّ سفينتي المهزومة  
فوقَ حصَى الأسفلتِ.

الناسُ يسيرونَ نياماً  
مفتوحِ الأُحداقِ  
وعلى الأكتافِ حقائبُ ماءٍ  
تلعقُها أسماكُ غرثي  
تُقعِي فوقَ الأرضِ.

٣ أبريل ١٩٩٨

### Thirteenth Impression

The café vacated  
and the cursed poet hid fearfully  
as corpses of dead sailors surround him.

He arrived to ask about  
the solar ship departure port  
about...  
a ticket office  
for the journey of the other world  
but the night lowered its wings  
upon the city neighborhoods in silence  
and hid markings of the secret harbor  
the solar ships  
and the sea.

April 4, 1998

### انطباع ثالث عشر

أَقْفَرَ الْمَقْهَى  
وَأَنْزَوَى الشَّاعِرُ الْمَلْعُونُ خَوْفًا  
نُحَيْطُهُ جُنْتُ الْبَحَّارَةِ الْمَوْتَى.

جَاءَ يَسْأَلُ عَنْ  
مِينَاءِ إِقْلَاعِ مَرَكَبِ الشَّمْسِ  
عَنْ...  
سُبَّانِكِ حَجَزِ  
لِرِحْلَةِ الْعَالَمِ الْآخِرِ  
لَكِنَّ اللَّيْلَ أَرَخَى جَنَاحِيهِ  
عَلَى أَحْيَاءِ الْمَدِينَةِ فِي صَمْتٍ  
فَأَخْفَى مَعَالِمَ الْمَرْفَأِ السَّرِّيِّ  
أَخْفَى مَرَاكِبَ الشَّمْسِ  
وَالْبَحْرِ.

٤ أبريل ١٩٩٨



## Fourteenth Impression

Were you really  
crossing the alleyways that dust covered its inhabitants  
until you did not know  
whether old mannequins  
were looking down from the houses' windows  
or embodiments of the returnee's visions after the initial  
shock  
from verses of awe?

Yes, it has changed  
the Alexandria that you knew has changed.  
And perhaps it disappeared forever.  
Disappeared like the capitals of imagination and madness

you returned today  
did you see what you wanted to see?  
Anything?

The people in your eyes are stones  
covered by dust of the past  
their faces featureless  
their houses broken revealing what they hide.

Most of the names of the main streets have changed  
just as the vanished monuments of the city have changed  
changed just as  
the features of men  
and women  
and children.

## انطباع رابع عشر

هَلْ كُنْتَ حَقًّا  
تَذْرَعُ الشَّوَارِعَ الْخَلْفِيَّةَ الَّتِي كَسَا سُكَّانُهَا الْعُبَارُ  
حَتَّى لَمْ تَكُنْ تَدْرِي  
إِذَا كَانَتْ دُمَى قَدِيمَةً  
تَطُلُ مِنْ نَوَافِذِ الْبُيُوتِ  
أَوْ مَجَسَّمَاتٍ لِرُؤْيَى الْعَائِدِ بَعْدَ الصَّدْمَةِ الْأُولَى  
بِآيَاتِ الذُّهُولِ؟

بَلَى لَقَدْ تَغَيَّرَتْ  
إِسْكَندْرِيَّةُ الَّتِي عَرَفْتَهَا تَغَيَّرَتْ.  
وَرُبَّمَا اخْتَفَتْ إِلَى الْأَبَدِ.  
كَمَا اخْتَفَتْ عَوَاصِمُ الْخَيَالِ وَالْجُنُونِ

هَا أَنْتَ عُدْتَ الْيَوْمَ  
هَلْ شَاهَدْتَ شَيْئاً كُنْتَ تَبْغِي أَنْ تَرَاهُ؟  
أَيَّ شَيْءٍ؟  
النَّاسُ فِي عَيْنَيْكَ أَحْجَارٌ  
يُغَطِّيهَا عُبَارُ الزَّمَنِ الْمَاضِي  
وَجُوهُهُمْ بِلَا مَلَامِحٍ  
بُيُوتُهُمْ مَبْفُورَةٌ تَكْتَشِفُ عَمَّا يُبْطِنُونَ.

تَغَيَّرَتْ مُعْظَمُ أَسْمَاءِ الشَّوَارِعِ الرَّئِيسِيَّةِ  
مِثْلَمَا تَغَيَّرَتْ مَعَالِمُ الْمَدِينَةِ الَّتِي اخْتَفَتْ  
وَمِثْلَمَا تَغَيَّرَتْ  
مَلَامِحُ الرَّجَالِ  
وَالنِّسَاءِ  
وَالْبَنِينَ.

April 10, 1998

١٠ أبريل ١٩٩٨

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